

The (Many) Worlds of World Literature: Redefining World Literature in the Context of Untranslatability

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The concept of the ‘untranslatability’, popularised by Emily Apter in her ‘Against World Literature’ has proved to be a major force behind redefining the scope and the very concept of ‘World Literature’. Theorists of postcolonialism have criticised translation’s direction of traffic in World Literature, characterising it as a plundering of cultures that entrenched the global hegemony of the English language. The process both exoticised other cultures and created a false sense of equivalence between them, fetishising the appearance of alterity while erasing difference. Others objected to the commodification of literature for an elite market: the creation of an easily digestible World Literature canon, constructed by the academy, to attract a broader pool of fee-paying students. The phenomenon of World Literature, taught in the lecture hall via translations, seemed to validate Erich Auerbach’s gloomy prediction that ‘*in a single literary culture ... the notion of Weltliteratur would be at once realized and destroyed.*’ This paper seeks to analyse how untranslatability, despite facing adverse criticism, has gone on to re-define the World Literature. Towards this, the paper will chart the relation between World Literature and Translation and elucidate the impact of untranslatability by defining the very perspectives from which it has influenced the concept. It will also analyse the adverse criticisms that the term ‘untranslatability’ has faced.

In 1967, R.K. Dasgupta gave World Literature a threefold definition that is useful for this discussion. First, World Literature can be “*the sum total of all the literatures of the world,*” a wide definition upon which the arguments of this article are based. Second, the term refers to “*works in the different literatures of the world which have attained world recognition*” (399). Dasgupta’s second definition corresponds to prizewinning and in some cases bestselling literature, the literature that has jostled its way to the top of the literary system. And third, world literature can be viewed as “*different literatures of the world conceived as one literature*” and this is now the predominant meaning of the term (399).

In his famous “*What is World Literature*”, David Damrosch defined ‘World Literature’ in terms of translation. Damrosch points out that translation played an important role in creating the category of ‘world literature’. To the question ‘Why should anyone read this motley assembly of texts?’, Damrosch answers that he wants to trace ‘what is lost and what is gained in translation, looking at the intertwined shifts of language, era, region, religion and literary context that a work can incur as it moves from its point of origin out into a new cultural sphere.’ Apter’s criticism of the advocacy of the translation process as a primary necessity of ‘World Literature’ is based on the essentially Anglo-centrism of the translation process. As Apter argues

Both translation studies and World Literature extended the promise of worldly criticism, politicised cosmopolitanism, comparability aesthetics galvanized by a deprovincialised Europe, an academically redistributed area studies and a redrawn map of language geopolitics. Partnered, they could deliver still more: translation theory as ‘Weltliterateur’ would challenge flaccid globalisms that paid lip service to alterity while doing little more than to buttress neoliberal ‘big tent’ syllabi taught in English.

World literature for Damrosch is not about canon, but rather a mode of circulation and of reading by means of translation, especially in the West. Some countries have less contact with the West, and thus the chance of translation is rare, though one may find works of astonishing beauty and high quality. Damrosch emphasized that “*reception of texts has to do with the American interests and needs than with genuine openness to other cultures*” (18). Based upon this, the scope of world literature is still restricted, and Damrosch rightly articulated that “*foreign works will barely be translated at all unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question*” (18). This is one of the strong points that Damrosch presented in his book. Some writers, as it is known, in order to attain international fame, align themselves with western ideologies to achieve their purposes. They sometimes work against the interest of their nations, denouncing their cultures as well as religions in an attempt to attract the western secular view. Damrosch emphasized that “*we need to look closely at the ways a work becomes reframed in its translations and its new cultural contexts*” (24). World Literature, according to him, is constituted very differently in different cultures. For example, World Literature in Brazil has long been shaped by a different set of forces. As he maintained, “*Even a genuinely global perspective remains a perspective from somewhere, and global patterns of the circulation of world literature take shape in their local manifestations*” (27). Addressing the issue of translation “what is lost and what is gained”, Damrosch made it clear that “*we can gain a work of world literature but lose the author’s soul*” (36). However, he later indicated that works gain in translation. In the preface to the 6-volume *Longman Anthology of World Literature*, translation functions, they say, “not so much by mirroring and reflecting an unchanged meaning, as by refracting it, in a prismatic process that can add new highlights and reveal new facets in a classic text” (Damrosch and Pike, 2009: xxv). but the obvious objection is that one may equally well say that old facets and highlights may be lost or obscured. To tip the balance in favour of gains in translation, Damrosch has two main lines of argument. The first concerns the usual meaning of the phrase “to gain in translation”, that is, broadly, that the translation of a given text is somehow preferable to the original. Damrosch’s other line of argument for “gains in translation” is pursued more extensively but not, to my mind, more compellingly. He writes: “works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range” (289). So here it is accepted in passing that there may be “stylistic losses”, but these disadvantages are outweighed, it is asserted, by “an expansion in depth” as texts “increase their range”. What this comes down to, as far as I can see, is that translated texts gain readers, and get interpreted in new ways, outside their own linguistic sphere. This is indeed a good thing, if the text is worth reading, but it is an odd way to use the phrase “gains in translation”; to me it seems a bit like describing a book’s argument as wide-ranging on the basis that you had the book in your backpack when you went on holiday. In any case, any writing would “gain in translation” in that broad sense, which therefore cannot help define and delimit “world literature”. Clearly there are interesting things to say about certain books’ afterlives, in the original and in translation, across different cultures, as Damrosch’s own work demonstrates. But I do not see how that amounts to a claim for what Damrosch calls an “expansion in depth” when texts are translated. And none of this addresses the concerns of those who think that literary texts tend to lose in translation, or to be “untranslatable”.

The creation of nation states in Europe in the nineteenth century went hand in hand with the emergence of the idea of a transnational literature where translation was an important tool of transmission and exchange. It was believed that translation could foster dialogue and understanding between nations that cultural mediation could compensate for the arrogance, intolerance and ethnocentrism of the nation state. For instance, Thomas Carlyle in his 1827 essay on the state of German literature remarks that it has the best, as

well as the most translations because “*the Germans study foreign nations in a spirit which deserves to be oftener imitated. It is their honest endeavor to understand each, with its own particularities, in its own special manner of existing; not that they may praise it, or censure it, or attempt to alter it, but simply that they may see its manner of existing as the nation itself sees it, and so participate in whatever worth or beauty it has brought into being*” (70). In this scheme of things translation comes to carry a heavy burden, as instanced by Antoine Berman’s often-quoted idea of translation as a decentering force, as an escape route from ethnocentrism: “*the essence of translation is to be an opening, a dialogue, a cross-breeding, a decentering. Translation is a ‘putting in touch with,’ or it is nothing*” (Berman 4). This statement might seem unduly optimistic today and yet it is a breath of fresh air for the literatures of Europe where each one has evolved from a nationalistic base. Further, the belief that translation fosters dialogue underlies many discussions of the subject. A few have questioned it. Douglas Robinson, for example, has drawn attention to a metanarrative of postcolonial translation studies whereby cultures are seen to progress through certain stages: the precolonial state, the colonial state, the postcolonial state, and a future decolonized state (89–90). It is often assumed that decolonization leads to more translation, although this is not necessarily the case. Translation is important for the creation of World Literature, but fades into the background once this ambition is achieved. Mona Baker has questioned the metaphor of bridge building in translation in her study of how translation can prevent dialogue, block contacts, and support ethnocentrism on a global scale in the so-called war on terror. Already in the early-twentieth century, supranational attempts to redeem political divisions between nation states through translations of literature were inevitably connected to politics. The attainment of “world recognition,” as in Dasgupta’s second sense, was not without controversy. The Nobel Prize in Literature helped to promote the idea of an ideal library of all the countries of the world, a kind of United Nations of literature and Werner Friedrich called the Nobel a sort of “NATO of literature,” but a literary version that only contains in fact a quarter of the NATO nations (Friedrich qtd. in Damrosch 1).

Any discussion of World Literatures in the post-colonial scenario requires a cultural-political perspective. The resurgence of world literature and its opposition to postcolonial literature has ignited vigorous debates. While some scholars have publicly confronted contentious claims of Postcolonial Studies’ dwindling scholarship in an era of Globalization Studies, Translation Studies, and World Literature—Baidik Bhattacharya’s *Postcolonial Writing in the Era of World Literature*; Amir Mufti’s *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*; and Chantal Zabus’s *The Future of Postcolonial Studies*, come to mind—others have privately exchanged their defense in their classrooms or on paper. Whether against world literature’s veritable erasure of the (postcolonial) Other, or its unassuming rendering of a Europe-centered perspective, its coeval rebirthing and mission to replace postcolonial literature is a self-mystifying hyperbole that generates distortions of its appearance versus its essence. In world literature’s attempt to be an exemplary substitute to postcolonial literary criticism, it has avoided its own representational claims. The opposition between World Literature and postcolonial literature is deeply problematic in its entrenchment of how opposition is secured and validated. Difference is necessary, almost injunctive to growing as a scholar, while rekindled suspicion and passion are entertaining in theoretical debates.

The disciplinary relationship of World Literature to various disciplines fails to address the hindrances posed by untranslatability, which Emily Apter invokes as “*a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors*” (Apter: 2013, 3). Apter engages in a polemical critique of recent efforts to revive World Literature models of literary studies (Moretti, Casanova, etc) on the grounds that they construct their curricula on an assumption of translatability. As a result, incommensurability and what Apter calls the “untranslatable” are insufficiently built into the literary heuristic.

Drawing on philosophies of translation developed by de Man, Derrida, Sam Weber, Barbara Johnson, Abdelfattah Kilito and Eidouard Glissant, as well as on the way in which “the untranslatable” is given substance in the context of Barbara Cassin’s *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, the aim is to activate ‘Untranslatability’ as a theoretical fulcrum of Comparative Literature with bearing on approaches to world literature, literary world systems and literary history, the politics of periodization, the translation of philosophy and theory, and the bounds of non-secular proscription and cultural sanction.

In post-colonial debates, the difference of cultures and literatures has become the leading term. The deconstructionist concept of translation has been related to historical reality: deconstructionist rejection of fixed referential meaning and clearly defined organic cultural entities in favour of process and of the identical in favour of otherness, have had an important impact on the conceptualization of intercultural transfer, intellectual confrontation and translation. Cultures are no longer regarded as homogeneous monads, but as refracted by constructions of alterity and also by their blending of foreign cultures.

“World literature” is as heavily freighted as any of Apter’s Untranslatables, and many of its common usages have only slight relation to literary texts. It has worked historically to map the lines of inheritance—cultural and otherwise—that separate high from low, smart from dumb, timeless from temporary, haves from have-nots. We can agree, then, that poetry may stand emblematically for that which is particularly hard to translate, or “impossible” in some sense that is not exactly metaphorical, and also that, nevertheless, tellingly, quite a lot of poetry does, in fact, get translated, and translated well, and published and read in translation. This seems to suggest, contrary to what Damrosch implies at the end of that last quotation, that it is not “translatability” that decides what gets translated. Indeed, untranslatability, or the “impossibility” of translation, clearly attracts some translators, and may help make of their translations compelling creative works (that may or may not get published, read, or studied). Besides many translations of poetry, another striking example would be the translation of Perec’s *La Disparition*, a novel from which the letter e, usually the most common in French, is entirely absent. For a writer such as Perec, the self-imposed lipogrammatic constraint is seen as productive, in the same way that the constraints of rigid verse forms may promote a poet’s creativity and produce innovative effects for the reader. For prospective translators of *La Disparition* (literally “The Disappearance”), the constraints of translation, on top of the ferocious constraint of the lipogram, must have a similar appeal. Besides Gilbert Adair’s acclaimed English translation, whose title, *A Void* (1994), is already an impressive accomplishment, there are unpublished English translations and, as Wikipedia (n.d.) points out, translations into Dutch, German, Italian, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish. The “untranslatable” is exactly what some people feel the urge to translate; and being untranslatable need not stop a text from travelling, in translation, around the world. When Goethe invoked *weltliteratur* in the early nineteenth century, it was to imagine how German poetry would supersede other nations’ to become “the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men.” That assertion of the global value of local goods was built into *weltliteratur* from the start, and Karl Marx borrowed the term decades later to theorize the economic value Goethe implied. For Marx, world literature was a cultural effect of economic compulsion, a testimony to the market imperative that “chases the bourgeoisie over the surface of the whole globe,” compelling them to “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.”

At a mundane linguistic level, untranslatability is a familiar phenomenon. It is the most common reason for one language to borrow a word from another: we didn’t have an English word for *pizza*, so we imported the Italian one. Modern English has absorbed such a large number of words from other languages that those derived from its Anglo-

Saxon base are a minority, outnumbered by borrowings from French alone. It is startling to realise that when we talk about *God* or the *gods*, we are using a word that was, initially, considered sufficiently untranslatable that the Germanic ancestor of the English language had to borrow it from a non-Indo-European linguistic substratum about which we know little – perhaps the same language from which we derive *folk*, another word without a convincing Indo-European etymology.

Untranslatability arises because of the cultural differences between the people speaking the original language text and those speaking the language of the target language text. Kinship terms are created in social and cultural context of a language hence differs from language to language. In India, there is more specification of kinship terms than English, e.g. in Marathi ‘Mama’ is ‘mother’s brother’ and ‘Kaka’ is ‘father’s brother’ but in English, there is only ‘uncle’ for both terms. Accurate translation of kinship terms is very difficult: ‘Because kinship terms articulate a specific structure which is, if at all, only minimally shared between different societies, putting them into English immediately confronts the writer with doubts about translatability’. As Rosman and Rubel explain, the first difficulty arises when collecting information on kinship terms, especially if English prompts are used. For example, the word for ‘father’s sister’s son’ may elicit the local language translation of ‘father’s sister’s son’ rather than the lexical item which would be used for this category in the local language itself. It is also problematic to translate categories into English categories which are quite differently structured.’ (Sturge 21). Each and every language has its own terminology of emotions to express and most of the time such terms cannot be translated. There is again, differentiation among languages regarding sex/ taboo terms:

‘And therefore many well-documented cases of sex-related differences in the literature, which do not necessarily reflect the same attitudes towards social status or male and female roles as do the sex-related differences that exist in our own society. The relation between language-variation and its social correlates is such that broad generalizations in terms of variables like sex, age and social class soon give way, in particular instances, to more detailed and more interesting statements which make reference to the structure of different societies and to the attitudes (i.e. to the culture) of their members.’ (Lyons 274).

The process of translation, therefore, entails a reading that creates endless possibilities of production of meanings, by translating the ‘traces’ in the ‘source text’, which is the absent part of the sign’s presence, the sign left by the absent thing, after it has passed on the scene of its former presence. Every present, in order to know itself as present, bears the trace of an absent which defines it. It follows then that an originary present must bear an originary trace, the present trace of a past which never took place, an absolute past. In this way, Derrida believes, he achieves a position beyond absolute knowledge. According to Derrida, the trace itself does not exist because it is self-effacing. That is, in presenting itself, it becomes effaced. Because all signifiers viewed as present in Western thought will necessarily contain traces of other (absent) signifiers, the signifier can be neither wholly present nor wholly absent. This is similar to other kinds of creative writing. (Chatterjee, 2020)

While the theorists of World Literature, especially David Damrosch, insist on translatability of a text, and its subsequent translation, as an essential feature of the texts (in the sense of Stanley Fish), the element of resistance and their subsequent untranslatability, cannot be negated as per the poststructural and postmodern definition of translatability. Derrida, in his reading of Benjamin, has defined translation in terms of ‘afterlife’. He defines the translated text as a creative work that resituates the ‘sacred original’ in the target language and culture. Thus, keeping in view the definition of World Literature by David Damrosch and the definition of translation offered by Derrida, it can be argued that untranslatability, not in the sense of a lack of tension between textuality and its translation, but by its endless potential of resisting the process of translation, simultaneously resists and ensures the survival of the ‘sacred original’ in the target language and culture.

Thus world literature needs to happen — as it were — along the following lines: “Setting up a comparative transcultural history of literature that would present its own theoretical limitations and fallacies but would simultaneously offer an effective and understandable assessment of the topic at hand (literary influence, period styles, revolutionary trends, global currents and convergencies, etc.), and thereby would reconcile the dangerous and cautionary aspects of theory with the need to maintain a disciplinary endeavor (the writing of a literary history, no matter how it is defined, be it in national, comparative, or global terms) presents a task that is both daunting and fraught with pitfalls” (Sueur 95). Along the various types of choices — personal, communal, national — which motivate translation, interpretation, and dissemination there are two seemingly opposite situations: in the first the translator selects texts similar to his/her own culture and which are easy for readers at home to understand and in the second the translator selects texts which are different from his/her own native culture, but which he/she sees as pivotal for the cultural development of his/her own nation. In the former situation it is relatively easy for readers to understand and accept texts. In the latter greater obstacles and resistance might be encountered. However, in each case the text needs to go through the filtering of the national culture.

Different from the selection mechanisms within national literatures, the selection processes in world literature and translated literature occurs across cultural and language barriers: “The foreign text is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests. The inscription begins with the very choice of a text for translation, always a very selective, densely motivated choice, and continues in the development of discursive strategies to translate it, always a choice of certain domestic discourses over others” (Venuti 468). This means that texts in translation always lose something with regard to source texts, but they also gain something, mainly the right to go beyond the boundaries of their own nationalities and to be read and understood in other national contexts. This also means that a national literature does not enter the literary territory of other nations instantly. As long as it is translated, there will certainly be problems regarding re-writing, variation, and misreading, and all forms of cultural variation: world literature is an “an elliptical refraction of national literatures . . . that gains in translation . . . not a set canon of texts but a model of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (Damrosch, *What Is* 281). The so-called “elliptical refraction” is different from simple reflection: if a person stands in front of an even mirror, then the image in the mirror is a simple reflection of this person’s image, but if this person stands in front of an uneven mirror, the image will be deformed into an elliptical refraction. National literature and world literature enable such elliptical refractions rather than simple reflection and since world literature is related to both source and target literature, this refraction is “double” in nature. An elliptical shape is formed in the overlapping dual zone of the source culture and the receiving culture: world Literature is produced in this middle ground associated with both cultures and not limited to any one part alone.

I posit that it is not enough to talk about cultural variation in terms of World Literature. It is not only necessary to stress specificity and distinctiveness, but also commonality, generality, and cultural convergence. It is not only necessary to talk about unidirectional variation, but also bidirectional and multidirectional variation. World literature refers to national literature that can transcend the specificity of the nation-state’s cultural boundaries and ascend to the common where it can be read and understood by the readers of other cultures representing both, unity between specificity and commonality, and variation and convergence: “A national literature poses all the questions. It must signal the self-assertion of new peoples, in what one calls their rootedness, and which is today their struggle. That is its sacralizing function, epic or tragic. It must express — and if it does not (and only if it does not) it remains regionalist, that is moribund and folkloric — the relationship of one culture to another in the Diverse, its contribution to totalization. Such

is its analytical and political function which does not operate without calling into question its own existence” (Glissant 252).

In conclusion, we have to say that without detecting and dealing with cultural untranslatability, translators may fail to convey the naturalness or even the source text true intention. Because cultural untranslatability is not applicable to all language combinations, the concept may be insignificant to translators or translation scholars who work in a language combination that involves no or only a marginal cultural difference. Depending on the local notion of correctness peculiar to the socio-cultural context; however, some translations can indeed be incompatible with the target language text. Finally, it must be observed that translating such culturally untranslatable items entails sufficient knowledge about the culture, demanding sensible approaches by translators.

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